

**Labor Organization Gilded Age  
(1877-1900)**

**Task One:**

Walk around the room and complete the chart below on the various posters/pamphlets and raps you hear. After you have gone to each station you will meet back with your original group to answer the below italicized question.

*How did labor respond to the growing power of corporations and to what extent were they effective?*

Take notes on important (facts/dates/leader names associated with the various unions and strikes	Was this union/strike successful? Explain.

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**Task Two:** Meet back with your original group and answer the question listed at the top of this worksheet.

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*Additional notes to consider when writing your response.*

**Strikes:**

1877-1900 the U.S. saw 12 armed struggles between labor and management

**Wages/Income:**

- Average work week: 60 hours
- Average rate of pay for an unskilled industrial worker: 10 cents/hour (\$2.59 in 2014)
- Average annual income:
  - In 1890, 11 million of the nation's 12 million families earned less than \$1200 per year (\$31,139 in 2014).
  - Of this group, the average annual income was \$380 (\$9860 in 2014), well below the poverty line.

Response Below:

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## American Federation of Labor

The American Federation of Labor (AFL) was an association of trade unions representing skilled workers in many industries. Although each trade union was a separate organization, the AFL leadership coordinated most large-scale activities, such as contract negotiations, strikes, and legislative issues. By the end of the 19th century, the AFL was the dominant organization representing the interests of skilled labor in the United States.



Throughout the second half of the 19th century, many workers organized in labor unions. Trade unions represented workers in such specific trades as carpentry or brick-laying. Industry unions represented workers in such specific businesses as steel-making. The Knights of Labor experienced enormous success in the 1870s by representing workers from both trade unions and industry unions, and representing both skilled and unskilled labor. Its leadership, however, became increasingly concerned with enacting radical changes in America's social and political life to elevate the place of workers in society. Most workers, on the other hand, remained more concerned with improving their day-to-day working conditions and earning higher wages. This discrepancy eventually led to two meetings between the leaders of the Knights of Labor and representatives from some of the more powerful trade unions that the Knights represented.



The first meeting, held in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in November 1881, established a new organization named the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions, which would focus on the needs of trade unions. Samuel Gompers, the head of the influential Cigar Makers' International Union, was elected chairman of the organizing committee. The impact of the new federation was limited, however, because the Knights of Labor and some of the larger trade unions pulled out shortly after the meeting. With their differences unresolved, tensions between the Knights and various trade unions increased during the 1880s.

In May 1886, a second meeting was held in Philadelphia between leaders of the Knights of Labor and representatives from several trade unions in an attempt to resolve the conflicts in their goals. Throughout the meeting, however, it became increasingly clear that reconciliation was not possible, and the meeting ended without any clear-cut resolutions.

Seven months later, representatives from several powerful trade unions met in Columbus, Ohio without representatives from the Knights of Labor. The leaders of the trade unions decided to create a new organization to represent skilled labor that would replace the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions and be entirely independent of the Knights of Labor. The new organization was called the American Federation of Labor, and Gompers was selected as its president.

Under Gompers' leadership, the AFL agreed to represent all trade unions, but to protect each union's separate

identity and autonomy. It bargained for skilled workers exclusively on economic issues, such as higher wages and shorter hours, rather than on social or political issues. It also distanced itself from socialist and communist causes in order to offset management claims that AFL leaders were socialist reformers. The AFL's major strategy was to negotiate labor contracts, resorting to strikes only in cases of dire necessity. When negotiating, it acknowledged current business conditions (which were often the impetus behind management's decisions to cut wages or reduce employee benefits) and did not try to change a company's business practices or promote the need for any broad social changes for its workers. The AFL focused on improving the day-to-day conditions for workers. In time, businesses found that it was cheaper to negotiate than to fight the AFL.

In its early years, Gompers was the driving force behind the AFL. He personally coordinated activities between the trade unions, participated in their collective bargaining, talked to union members everywhere, fought with the Knights of Labor for members, and continually made speeches to anyone who would listen. As the 19th century ended, Gompers was still a firm believer that trade unions represented workers better than industry unions. But the AFL increasingly had trouble organizing workers in the large, highly integrated companies being created by industry mergers at the turn of the century, such as General Electric, because of the need for so many trade unions to represent workers in such diverse companies. The AFL did not recognize until many years later that industry unions were a better way to organize these integrated companies. Another failure was that Gompers was not able to recruit the four large railway brotherhoods (engineers, firemen, conductors, and trainmen) to join the AFL. In 1900, the four brotherhoods represented a lot of skilled workmen, and their absence from the AFL marked a serious loss for the organization.

During the first half of the 20th century, the AFL had an erratic history—winning when Congress passed labor-friendly legislation, losing when the courts annulled the new laws. Gompers died in December 1924 and was replaced by William Greene. In 1935, John L. Lewis founded the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to coordinate industry unions, initially as an organization within the AFL, but after 1937, as an independent organization. In 1955, the AFL and CIO merged to form the AFL-CIO, creating an organization that could represent both trade and industry unions.

### Further Reading

Dulles, Foster Rhea, and Melvyn Dubofsky, *Labor in America*, 1993; Foner, Eric, and John A. Garraty, eds., *The Reader's Companion to American History*, 1991; Foner, Philip S., *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, 5 vols., 1947-1980; Taylor, Paul F., *The American Labor Movement*, 1993.

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#### American Federation of Labor Preamble

Whereas, A struggle is going on in all the nations of the civilized world between the oppressors and the oppressed of all countries, a struggle between the capitalist and the laborer, which grows in intensity from year to year, and will work disastrous results to the toiling millions if they are not combined for mutual protection and benefit.

It, therefore, behooves the representatives of the Trade and Labor Unions of America in Convention assembled, to adopt such measures and disseminate such principles among the mechanics and laborers of our country as will permanently unite them to secure the recognition of rights to which they are justly entitled.

We, therefore, declare ourselves in favor of the formation of a thorough Federation, embracing every Trade and Labor Organization in America, organized under the Trade Union system.

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## Knights of Labor

The Knights of Labor was the largest and most powerful labor union in America during the last half of the 19th century. It represented all workers—men and women, white and black, citizen and immigrant, and skilled and unskilled—in all industries. Even though the union did not survive into the 20th century, it gave American workers a sense of unity and showed them the power of organized labor.



By the 1860s, small craft unions representing specific skilled tradesmen existed in many industries, but their size limited their influence and effectiveness, and many collapsed without accomplishing much. When a craft union, the Garment Cutters' Association (representing tailors in the American Hose Company of Philadelphia) dissolved for lack of funds, nine of the tailors decided to form a new union based on broader concepts of organization and unity. In December 1869, they formed the Noble and Holy Order of the Knights of Labor. In many ways, the union was more like a fraternal order: its membership was secret, in part to protect members from retaliation, and it espoused many socialist causes, such as workers' cooperatives and a classless membership representing all workers, including managers. One of its founders, Uriah Stephens, was elected Master Workman (or president) of the union.

Although the founders hoped that the union would ultimately represent workers from all industries, the union initially grew by establishing small, local groups (called assemblies) of workers in the same craft or trade. Various craft assemblies—such as garment cutters, ship carpenters, machinists, and blacksmiths—were then merged together to form a district assembly. In smaller towns, mixed assemblies were formed when workers from all sorts of professions joined the same assembly in order to have enough local members. In time, the mixed assemblies outnumbered the craft assemblies, giving them a stronger voice in the union. In the early 1880s, unskilled workers, women, and African-American workers were also admitted to the assemblies.

In 1878, the Knights of Labor held a general convention to form a national assembly for its 9,300 members. They approved a constitution stating that the union was open to all wage earners except lawyers, doctors, bankers, liquor dealers, stockbrokers, and professional gamblers. The union's stated objectives included abolishing child labor, obtaining equal pay for equal work, establishing an eight-hour workday, and lobbying for the creation of a Bureau of Labor Statistics within the federal government.

The union's leadership advocated arbitration and boycotts to settle labor disputes but did not support strikes. Members of the union, however, were more prone to resort to strikes to achieve their goals. Therefore, the union participated in the Great Railroad Strike of 1877 and won wage increases on several railroads, which expanded its membership significantly.

After Stephens retired in 1879, Terence Powderly took over leadership of the union. Powderly dropped the secret aspects of the organization and shortened its name to the Knights of Labor. He also established cooperatives,



where union members would set up and operate a cooperative business under the joint ownership of all the workers in the business. Some 135 cooperatives were set up in coal-mining, barrel-making, shoe-making, printing, and other industries. On the whole, these cooperatives were not very successful.

When a nationwide economic recession caused businesses to reduce workers' wages in 1883 and 1884, the Knights fought back with strikes in the glass, telegraph, cotton, shoe-manufacturing, carpet-weaving, mining, iron-casting, and railroad industries—winning all but one strike. In 1884, the union won a major victory in a strike against the Union Pacific Railroad over wages. In 1885, the union also won the first of two strikes against Jay Gould's Southwestern railroad empire, but lost the second strike in the spring of 1886. In the second strike, Gould used a strategy of total retaliation, laying off union members and employing government troops to limit the effects of the strike. The strategy was so successful that many companies adopted Gould's tactics to break later strikes. Congress finally passed union protection laws during the 20th century that outlawed the use of total retaliation to break strikes.

Early in 1886, the Knights reached its peak strength of 750,000 members, organized in more than 5,800 local assemblies. The Knights' image was hurt, however, by the second strike on Gould's railroad empire and was damaged even more when some union members became involved in Chicago's Haymarket Square riot in May 1886. The incident started when someone threw a bomb into a police unit observing a meeting in the square, where union members were discussing a strike at McCormick Harvester. The riot that followed killed seven policemen and four workers, and injured more than 100 people. Although the union never authorized a strike at Harvester, members were involved in the rioting, and the Knights of Labor was blamed for the whole disturbance. After the Haymarket incident, Powderly tried to change the union's image by using legislative pressure instead of strikes and boycotts to settle labor disputes, but legislators were not cooperative.

By 1890, differences between the union's leadership and its members became more marked because the leadership focused on social and political issues to elevate the working-class, while many members were more concerned with such economic issues as higher wages and shorter working hours. When the union started having serious organizational problems in the early 1890s, James Sovereign replaced Powderly and attempted to reunify the Knights. The union was too fractured by this time, however, and the Knights of Labor slowly disintegrated as local assemblies increasingly drifted away from the national organization. Many of the local assemblies joined the American Federation of Labor (AFL), a new organization that functioned as a trade (or craft) union and represented only skilled workers.

By the start of the 20th century, the Knights of Labor was down to a few thousand members, mainly in assemblies around Boston that covered city employees and some railroads. The Boston assemblies finally merged into the AFL in 1949.

### Further Reading

Dulles, Foster Rhea, and Melvyn Dubofsky, *Labor in America*, 1993; Foner, Eric, and John A. Garraty, eds., *The Reader's Companion to American History*, 1991; Foner, Philip S., *History of the Labor Movement in the United States*, 5 vols., 1947-1980; Taylor, Paul F., *The ABC-CLIO Companion to the American Labor Movement*, 1993.

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## PREAMBLE TO THE CONSTITUTION OF THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR

Adopted 3 January 1878

The recent alarming development and aggression of aggregated wealth, which, unless checked, will inevitably lead to the pauperization and hopeless degradation of the toiling masses, render it imperative, if we desire to enjoy the blessings of life, that a check should be placed upon its power and upon unjust accumulation, and a system adopted which will secure to the laborer the fruits of his toil; and as this much-desired object can only be accomplished by [129] the thorough unification of labor, and the united efforts of those who obey the divine injunction that "In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread," we have formed the \* \* \* \* with a view of securing the organization and direction, by co-operative effort, of the power of the industrial classes; and we submit to the world the objects sought to be accomplished by our organization, calling upon all who believe in securing "the greatest good to the greatest number" to aid and assist us:

- I. To bring within the folds of organization every department of productive industry, making knowledge a standpoint for action, and industrial and moral worth, not wealth, the true standard of individual and national greatness.
- II. To secure to the toilers a proper share of the wealth that they create; more of the leisure that rightfully belongs to them; more societal advantages; more of the benefits, privileges and emoluments of the world; in a word, all those rights and privileges necessary to make them capable of enjoying, appreciating, defending and perpetuating the blessings of good government.
- III. To arrive at the true condition of the producing masses in their educational, moral and financial condition, by demanding from the various governments the establishment of Bureaus of Labor Statistics.
- IV. The establishment of co-operative institutions, productive and distributive.
- V. The reserving of the public lands--the heritage of the people--for the actual settler; not another acre for railroads or speculators.
- VI. The abrogation of all laws that do not bear equally upon capital and labor, the removal of unjust technicalities, delays and discriminations in the administration of justice, and the adopting of measures providing for the health and safety of those engaged in mining, manufacturing or building pursuits.
- VII. The enactment of laws to compel chartered corporations to pay their employe[e]s weekly, in full, for labor performed during the preceding week, in the lawful money of the country.
- VIII. The enactment of laws giving mechanics and laborers a first lien on their work for their full wages.
- IX. The abolishment of the contract system on national, State and municipal work.
- X. The substitution of arbitration for strikes, whenever and wherever employers and employe[e]s are willing to meet on equitable grounds.
- XI. The prohibition of the employment of children in workshops, mines and factories before attaining their fourteenth year.
- XII. To abolish the system of letting out by contract the labor of convicts in our prisons and reformatory institutions.

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## Industrial Workers of the World

The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), also known as the Wobblies, was launched in 1905 and remained a vital force in labor organizing through the 1930s. The most radical union in U.S. history, the style and heroism of the Wobblies produced labor strategies that were eventually used by more mainstream trade unions. The legacies of the IWW are also important in the field of civil rights, not only because the union embraced all manner of people, but also because of the organization's defense of the rights of dissenters.



In the early 20th century, most trade unions were organized by craft (carpenters, machinists, railroad brakemen, etc.) and were affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL). These skilled workers were able to win gains for themselves from their employers, but these gains often came at the expense of unskilled workers whom employers could easily replace. The IWW came together in Chicago in 1905, when more than 200 socialists and trade unionists launched an entirely new kind of union.

The Wobblies believed in the principles of Marxist class conflict, but their contribution to U.S. labor was the idea of industrial unionism, which led the IWW to recruit all sorts of unskilled and exploited workers. Immigrants, people of color, women, and migrant farm workers (all of whom were excluded from the craft unions of the AFL) were embraced by the IWW. They wanted to create "one big union" through which the workers could come to control the means of production and distribution.



The founding convention brought together such important labor leaders as Bill Haywood, then-secretary of the Western Federation of Miners; Eugene V. Debs, leader of the American Socialist Party; Mother Jones, legendary fighter for miners' and children's rights; Daniel De Leon, leader of the Socialist Labor Party; and a host of writers and editors of labor periodicals. Many differences split the opinions of these strong personalities, and some splintering occurred. The IWW was able to reach agreement by 1908, however, and draw up a constitution.

The IWW adopted such direct action strategies as strikes rather than seek labor contracts as the skilled AFL unions did. The Wobblies saw labor-management contracts as interfering with labor's right to strike, a position that remained controversial into the 1930s. The Wobblies believed, however, that a general strike in the future would be crucial to the overthrow of the capitalist system and that smaller strikes in the short term built experience and political perspective in the meantime. In the period before World War I, the IWW participated in at least 150 strikes in such industries as lumbering, construction, agriculture, dock work, marine transport, textiles, coal mining, copper mining, and in the oil fields.

Working to abolish the divisions between workers of different backgrounds, the IWW organized racially integrated unions and ignored traditional gender boundaries. Ben Fletcher was an African American who was the leader in



Philadelphia and was also considered a national IWW leader. Such women as Elizabeth Gurley Flynn led women workers but also led men workers, traveling throughout the country as an organizer. Spanish-speaking workers in the East Coast ports formed the core of IWW mariners' unions.

The IWW devoted considerable effort to educational campaigns through inspirational songs, revolutionary graphics, and the oratory of its dynamic leaders. The union believed it had the right not only to spread information among its members but also among those who were not employed. By handing out literature and educating workers in the hobo jungles and the sections of big cities where unemployed laborers gathered in hopes of landing temporary work, the IWW angered business leaders who relied on these pools of cheap labor. The IWW, especially before World War I, engaged in many legal struggles that helped to establish First Amendment rights to assemble peacefully and distribute literature.

During and after World War I, however, the Wobblies encountered intensified political opposition. Having retained their anti-military stance during the war, they had continued to lead strikes even after the United States entered into the conflict. The U.S. Department of Justice redefined such strikes as treason, branded the IWW leadership as subversives, and imprisoned nearly 100 labor leaders for terms of 10 to 20 years. Community hysteria during the war and the red scare that followed it inspired vigilante groups to engage in violent acts against IWW members and buildings. Law enforcement agencies did little to protect the Wobblies.

The legal battles in which the IWW engaged to protect the union began to take up much of the organization's time and resources. Divisions within the union were also introduced by the Russian Revolution of 1917. Many leaders were sympathetic to the revolution, and the party that had led it, the Bolsheviks, invited the Wobblies to join the Communist International in 1920. Soviet communism did not appeal to all leaders, however. Moreover, the philosophy of the Bolsheviks insisted on a "vanguard party"—a group of middle-class intellectuals—to lead the workers, whereas the Wobblies adhered to a plan for bottom-up union organizing in which workers would gradually gain control of industry through action on the job.

The national IWW continued to decline in the 1920s though it remained an important force in mariners' and farm workers' unions. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, it organized unemployed unions to provide housing and food for the jobless, and its leaders were important to the organizing efforts of many workers who did not end up joining the IWW.

The IWW's greatest legacy was to provide the ideas and organizing tactics that led to the mass unionization of the unskilled, foreign-born, nonwhite, and female workers of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and AFL unions of the 1930s and 1940s. Such techniques as the sit down strike, chain picketing, and car caravans were pioneered by the IWW in the early decades of the century.

Headquarters for the organization remain in Chicago. The membership has declined to less than 1,000, but the Wobblies still have a vigorous press. The union dedicated its historical materials to the archives of Wayne State University in Detroit.

### Further Reading

### *I.W. W. PREAMBLE*

The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life. Between these two classes a struggle must go on until the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the earth and the machinery of production, and abolish the wage system. We find that the centering of the management of industries into fewer and fewer hands makes the trade unions unable to cope with the ever growing power of the employing class. The trade unions foster a state of affairs which allows one set of workers to be pitted against another set of workers in the same industry, thereby helping defeat one another in wage wars. Moreover, the trade unions aid the employing class to mislead the workers into the belief that the working class have interests in common with their employers. These conditions can be changed and the interest of the working class upheld only by an organization formed in such a way that all its members in any one industry, or in all industries, if necessary, cease work whenever a strike or lookout is on in any department thereof, thus making an injury to one an injury to all. Instead of the conservative motto, "A fair day's wages for a fair day's work," we must inscribe on our banner the revolutionary watchword, "Abolition of the wage system." It is the historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism. The army of production must be organized, not only for the every day struggle with capitalists, but also to carry on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown. By organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old. Knowing, therefore, that such an organization is absolutely necessary for our emancipation, we unite under the following constitution: